



# HOLY CROSS TRACTS

Number 9

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## Hypocrites?

By WILLIAM J. ALBERTS

The eagerness with which human beings try to delude themselves is pathetic. Nowhere is this more pathetic than when it is seen in worldly people who attempt to point to the sins of Christians as a cloak for their own paganism.

Every so often we have someone who points out that so and so who attends church regularly—even devoutly—commits serious sins. “What is the point of his attending church if it does not do him any more good than that?” asks the plaintive pagan. “I don’t profess to be a Christian, but at least I’m no hypocrite. As a matter of fact I’m probably a better Christian than he.”

All this sounds very convincing and it is inevitably said with a smugness that betrays the speaker. But what are the facts? Let us examine them a bit further.

To begin with, to speak of church attendance as if it meant a profession to the world of one’s sinlessness betrays a complete lack of understanding of both Christianity and the function of the Church. Jesus said: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

The church is the hospital for sinners, not Mrs.

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Jollyby's Wax Works. Members of the Church are flesh and blood. Being flesh and blood they are heirs to all the sins the flesh is heir to. Their attendance at church, far from being a profession of righteousness, is a confession of sinfulness. They are sinners who need God's strengthening powers, and they know it!

In the Holy Communion we say: "We do not presume to come to this Thy table . . . trusting in our own righteousness." This is what saves the Christian both from his sins and from smug self-satisfaction. Confessing his sins he knows that he is not at all a lovely person apart from God's power to make him so. And likewise, confessing his sins is the means by which that power of God lifts them from his shoulders, frees him from the dead weight of his past, raises him from the slough of despond, and encourages him to reset his sights from earth to heaven, from self to Jesus Christ.

The smug pagan, pointing to the sinful Christian, is the 20th century counterpart of the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not as other men. The Christian, confessing his sins, often with heartbreak and tears, is the modern Publican. And we remember that it was this penitent sinner who was approved by our Lord rather than the other.

It is strange that Christians are so often accused of being Pharisees. There just is not any room in Christianity, certainly not in the Catholic concept of man as a fallen creature in need of grace and redeeming and being given salvation apart from any merit he possesses personally, for Pharisaism. When we begin to walk as penitent Christians, we join the Order of Publicans. Even

the greatest saints died not professing their righteousness, but confessing their sins.

The Church exists in the world precisely because there are sinners. It exists as a witness that men need God's absolution and power, not because men are sufficient in themselves. When the Kingdom of God is attained in God's good time and place, there will be no need for churches. But until that day, churches will be needed and sinners will continue to attend them.

To find fault with the Church or Christianity because this is so is short-sighted indeed. One might as well indict medicine and modern hospital practice because despite all the years of its practice, people are still sick. To accuse Christians of hypocrisy because they sin is as silly as to accuse a doctor of hypocrisy because he gets sick! The mere fact that health is the doctor's business does not prevent his getting sick. The mere fact that sainthood (spiritual health) is the Christian's business does not prevent him from contracting that soul sickness which we call sin.

Let us examine this hypocrisy business further. What is a hypocrite? Popularly defined, it means anyone who does not practice what he preaches. By this definition, is there anyone in the world who is not a hypocrite? Does anyone always practice what he preaches? In this life the ones who come closest to practicing what they preach all the time are those who give themselves to evil. The person who tries to rise above temptation and sin fails often and frequently grievously. But that in itself does not make him a hypocrite.

A hypocrite is not one who fails, but one who fails to try. On the basis of that definition, our critical and smug friends who find fault with



those who do try something more than they can attain to, are the hypocrites. The worst hypocrisy is the smug paganism which is so sure of its own virtue that it never engages in any self-criticism.

The dictionary says a hypocrite is one who feigns to be something he is not. Who then is the hypocrite? Certainly not the penitent Christian. He is not feigning goodness. He is confessing sin. But where does that leave the smug pagan who professes to virtue? It is evident that he is not all he feigns to be in the way of righteousness. Who then is the real hypocrite? Is not the worst hypocrisy the implied statement of the pagan that what he is is the best that can be attained?

Certainly there are persons attending church who are feigning a righteousness they do not possess. But that does not indict the penitent who attends regularly and still achieves less than he professes.

Christians, God help them, have many faults and many sins. Even the best of us know we are not very far along the path of heroic virtue. But even the worst of us is in a more hopeful state in God's eyes than the self-righteous man who knows within himself and proclaims to all who will listen that he is sufficient as he is: that he is as perfect now as he ever needs to be.

SP 10M 6-53

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